Speaker: Hoover led FBI against King

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A Hood College professor said Monday that the FBI's campaign against Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the product of J. Edgar Hoover's personal hatred against the slain civil rights leader.

History professor Gerald McKnight spoke Monday night on his six-year odyssey to obtain information from the FBI's file on Dr. King through the federal Freedom of Information Act.

Dr. McKnight's hour-long presentation, titled "Stalking the Federal Bureau of Investiongation: The Hazards and Rewards of Investigating the Investigators," was held in the school's Rosenstock Auditorium.

Midway through the presentation, Dr. McKnight produced a folder containing 407 pages of FBI information on Dr. King. The documents, he said, represented only the index of the bureau's main file. Dr. McKnight estimated that the FBI produced more than 250,000 pages of infomation on the civil rights leader, not including electronic surveillance transcripts.

A mid-1970s survey of the FBI's file concluded that the bureau never found evidence that Dr. King was a threat to national security, he said. "The report, and all of those manhours and all of those tax dollars, were based on one man's hatred," Dr. McKnight said.

Mr. Hoover conducted his campaign against Dr. King because the views of the civil rights leader "didn't square with J. Edgar Hoover's vision," Dr. McKnight said. He described the FBI as an "awesome" political force with little oversight that can be used by presidents for their own ends.

Dr. GERALD McKNIGHT

Opening his talk, Dr. McKnight said he first requested information from the FBI in October 1984, to allow a 16-month cushion before his sabbatical began in January, 1986. In August 1986, with his sabbatical nearly over and still no documents in hand, Dr. McKnight sued the FBI. Two days before the court date, the FBI capitulated and said it would "expedite" Dr. McKnight's request.

"If you're going to deal with the FBI, you've got to be prepared to live forever," he said.

According to Dr. McKnight the average FOIA request takes 6-10 years to be processed through the FBI. While "backlog is the operational word" with the bureau, officials are not rushing to hire more clerks. "The name of the game is delay," he said.

Dr. McKnight said the burden was on him to find his way through the bureau's "byzantine" system of classifications. "I know I don't have all of the dirty tricks used in the campaign (against Dr. King)," he said. "I don't know where they would all be."

Dr. McKnight said processing FOIA requests through the CIA and the Justice Department is even more difficult.